

## **SATISH ALEKAR'S *THE DREAD DEPARTURE* AS AN ABSURD PLAY**

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**T**he Marathi play *Mahanirvan* is written by Satish Alekar, a renowned Marathi playwright at his age of 22. It is translated into English by Gauri Deshpande as *The Dread Departure* in 1989. The sources of this play can be seen in the childhood observations of Alekar, who stays in Pune's Shanivar Peth where he has spent his childhood. The residence is close to the Maruti temple where he listened the Kirtans on various religious ceremonies. It is also very close to a crematorium where he usually experienced the sights of funeral rites. Death and Kirtan are deeply rooted in Alekar's psyche.

One of the important incidents in Alekar's life is the death of his grandmother when he was in his matriculation. He had closely observed all the death rites. She was burnt and admitted in the hospital for ten days after which she died. After her funeral, his grandfather said, "Did you notice? She was burnt before she died. The God of fire took her in two installments." This sentence made a deep impact on Alekar's mind. Later the Omkareshwar crematorium was shifted to another place. A thought came to his mind, " If a person's last desire is to be cremated in the old crematorium then would it give a rise to a play?"

*The Dread Departure* is based on the incidents of a common man's cremation and its rites in the city of Pune. The chief protagonist of the play is Bhaurao, a man from lower middle class. The play begins with the accidental death of Bhaurao. In the early morning when his wife Rama wakes him up, the soul of dead Bhaurao makes her conscious of his death. His only son Nana is out of the city. Listening Rama's loud cry, the neighbours come excitedly and take special interest in sympathizing the young widow. While waiting for the arrival of Nana, the preparation of cremation ceremony goes on. After Nana's arrival, the march proceeds to the old and traditional crematory. There they come to know that the old crematory is recently closed down by the municipal authorities. The neighbours are not ready to take the dead body to another crematory. They go away telling that they would call an ambulance; however never to return. Nana waits near the dead body of his father. The soul of Bhaurao opposes to be cremated in the new crematory and insists on his cremation in the old one. Nana finds himself in a great difficulty.

In the second act, Nana keeps the dead body on the loft in his house and tells a lie to the neighbours that he has cremated his father. He performs all the rites for thirteen days. In the meantime, he discovers that his mother has fallen in love with a man who is 'third-from-the-left' in the march. Nana becomes restless to know the identity of the man who is occupied in the heart of his mother. To find the answer, he also takes help of the dead Bhaurao. Although he cannot find the man, he discovers the unsatisfied desires in his mother's heart. Realizing this, even Bhaurao becomes restless. Nana cremates the rotting dead body in the old crematory by giving a bribe of two thousand rupees to the watchman.

Although *The Dread Departure* is described as an absurd play, Alekar denies any label for his play. He clearly mentions that when he started writing, he was very young. He never decided to write in a specific manner. Being a student of science, he never came in direct contact with a study of literature. Alekar feels he is benefited by this as he was fresh and never committed for anything. Even today he never remains in the circle of writers and critics. He writes as he likes to express. It is after writing *Mahanirvana* that he read the plays of Harold Pinter and Bertolt Brecht. However, in spite of his claims, the play reflects the general trends of absurd play. The present paper analyses Satish Alekar as one of the significant experimental playwrights of the twentieth century Indian drama.

Alekar feels that if the real life is presented on the stag, it would naturally be absurd. So, whenever he is presenting it is the truth, therefore it is absurd. If there is a failure of communication in language, human nature, manners then it gives rise to absurdity. Therefore, his characters are not traditional; they become anti-heroes, comic, their behaviour reflects meaningless and purposelessness of life.

The term 'The Theatre of the Absurd' or 'Absurd Drama' was coined by Martin Esslin. In his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), he calls certain dramatists as absurdist. According to him, there is no such thing as a regular movement of Absurd dramatist. In fact, such dramatists wrote separately. In this sense, the claim of Alekar that he is not influenced by any movement can be justified. He is merely reflecting the contemporary ethos in a realistic way. He is reflecting the absurdity evident in twentieth century civilization. By taking a specific instance of Marathi society in Pune, Alekar is focusing on the universal theme of meaningless of human behaviour. The play uses the common traits like circular structure, mime, verbal nonsense, fantasy etc. found in other absurd plays. Alekar is writing from, "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition."

The failure of communication in the modern society leaves man alienated. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the characters are not able to communicate with each other. There is no communication between Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo speaks too much, while Lucky says nothing. In Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*, the central figure Jerry cannot establish communication with anybody, not even with the dog of the owner of his house. In Harold

Pinter's *Birthday Party* Stanley is almost alienated from others. Towards the end he almost becomes speechless. Similarly, in *The Dread Departure*, Bhaurao cannot establish communication with his wife. There is no healthy communication between the father and the son. The failure to communicate leaves Bhaurao, Nana and Rama alienated.

Lack of individuality is found in the modern civilization. Man seems to have lost all the sense of individuality. Bhaurao's condition in the society is quiet absurd. The play has a number of events of comic nature with serious aspects. For instance, while the preparation of funeral is going on, an elder neighbour shows a typical middle class attitude in the following dialogue.

Go and bring all the necessary things. You will find the list in my room. Take it along and bribe every single thing that is on it. The shop is open day and night. But be careful. These days they will cheat you even at such times. And remember, bring the things in a tonga, not a riksha. The bamboos are too long for a riksha. You cant even hold them properly. When Chaugule's old lady died last year, his nephew tried to show off in a riksha and he got back hardly with stumps for his arms. So a tonga is better. Besides it's that much help for the poor, starving tongawalla. And select the pot carefully. Good, thin and slightly underbaked mud is best. A hole or two won't come amiss. Breaks easier. And also cheaper<sup>1</sup>.

Alekar has mocked the serious things like death, husband-wife relation, father-son relation, the neighbours selfish attitude etc. one of the central theme of absurd play is alienation or loneliness. Bhaurao seems to be alienated from Rama. Therefore, he tries to establish communication with Bandu's mother, however, without success. After his death he regrets that he could not dare to confess his feelings. Rama also is alienated and she starts filling the 'empty square' with the third-from-the-left:

I saw that face clearly only thirteen days ago. I saw him lift up Bhau's bier and knew... I hope you don't mind my speaking out like this and I knew that he was the one. My partner for the rest of my life. My prince who will take me away from this block. On a white charger. Then all my troubles will be over. No more housework, cooking and cleaning... It was as though all this melted away and there were just the two of us left in the world. Me and my third-from-the-left." (57)

The play speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind. Due to its circular nature, no conclusions can be offered. It begins with a comic dialogue and also ends with the same. Just like any absurd play, *The Dread Departure* does not have any story or plot. It is said that nothing happens in *Waiting for Godot*. In an absurd play, many things are left ambiguous. We are not told the real identity of the third- from-the-left, the nature of relation of Bhaurao with Bandu's mother, Nana's relation with the girl whose "frames have woven a frame in which the vague face of a girl is taking an definition." (67). He also feels that she sits in the dress circle. It is not clear what will happen with Rama and Nana. The play in the tradition of absurd drama has shorter dialogues and repeated expressions. Just like *Waiting for Godot*, the play shows a sense of nostalgia. Bhaurao's soul will not get a release unless he is cremated at the old crematorium. Alekar is trying to express that life is meaningless. Man has to struggle. There is no suggestion mentioned regarding the solution to the misery of man.

Thus, Satish Alekar's *The Dread Departure* is distinguished by an almost total lack of exposition. A breakdown of casual sequence makes the plot discontinuous. In this play, there is a decided lack of closure. The uncertainties of open-ended conclusions are appropriately matched by the language that is itself constantly questioned. Alekar emphasis the intractability of language as a means of communication and thus reflects the cultural crisis of the post-independence era with great fidelity.

**Works Cited :**

Alekar, Satish. *The Dread Departure*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007. Print.  
All the subsequent references are from this edition

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